Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain

Lisa McKenzie, Policy Press, Bristol, 2015, 224 pp,

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Over the past three decades the working-class and the places in which they live have become increasingly devalued and stigmatised. 'Poverty porn' programming on UK television has for instance produced the welfare 'scrounger/skiver'; an abject figure whose existence has offered 'justification' for new forms of economic punishment and conditional welfare (Jensen 2014). In essence, we have been subjected to simplistic constructions of modern working class experiences. That is most certainly not the case in this instance, where throughout the book a key argument is that council estates and those who live on them should "not only be seen as lacking" (p.13).

'*Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*', is the outcome of eight years' ethnographic research on the St Ann's estate in Nottingham. In it, Lisa McKenzie exposes the many complexities of life for the people of St Ann's as they endeavour to make the most out of living in a society built on inequality. The text is inspiring, authentic, and honest, and the narratives presented are grounded in the social and cultural context of the estate and British society. This allows the reader to have a more fundamental understanding of how this estate and its residents have "managed the very difficult circumstances in which they have found themselves". (p.20)

While there are many areas of interest in the book, there are two key recurring themes which it most admirably addresses:

- Challenging the myth of a 'Broken Britain'.

  and
- Belonging to and 'being St. Ann's'

Welfare reform has become a central tenet of the UK Government's quest to fix 'Broken Britain', and references to the 'underclass' and their 'culture of poverty' are increasingly being used by those trying to justify the continuous erosion of the welfare state. Working class families, particularly those living on 'council estates' are continuously faced with

discourses that "'they' are 'problems' and it is 'their' lifestyle choice to live in separated family units, or to struggle constantly on the edge of poverty" (101). In contrast to such constructions, this book ably demonstrates that living with consistent deprivation is extraordinarily difficult, and offers very poignant examples of how some residents try to relieve the pain of their daily struggles. The personal stories contained in the book clearly show that residents have strong community and family values; even if families on such estates function in different ways to overcome the numerous difficulties that structural inequality visits upon them.

Several chapters of the book focus on the stigmatised identity of St. Ann's, and how as a consequence, the estate's residents end up not only belonging to but "being St. Ann's". Resident's narratives tell of having to adapt to their circumstances, and crucially, of a reflexive awareness of the heterogeneity of their lives. The book speaks to the impact of "estatism" (Hanley 2007) whereby "staying in the estate, belonging to it, and being respected and valued on the inside" (p.87) are strategies adopted by residents as a way of "getting by" in the face of derision from those outside of St. Ann's. Estatism however, ensures that residents rarely make external connections; their social capital remains limited, and "their ideas and skills remain stunted… when they could be used to influence positive change within the neighbourhood" (pp.162-163).

In conclusion, this is a book of significance for the readership of this journal. Its biggest contribution to the field is that it provides perspective from those experiencing the brunt of the 'Broken Britain' policy agenda. Many policy interventions within poor neighbourhoods are prescriptive top down measures, and lack understanding of the real complexities of working-class communities. As such this book contributes to debate calling for the politics of social justice to be reconfigured, so that in addition to the concerns of structural inequality, it addresses how working-class people and where they live are seen and represented. I fully agree with McKenzie's assertion that "the experiences and the narratives in this book may be difficult to [fully] understand if you have never lived your life in the abys of the 'underclass', or feared becoming the reviled 'undeserving poor'" (p.6). Yet, that is precisely why this book is so important, because it has given a platform to "intentionally ignored people" to tell of their experiences, on their terms, and in their words (Jones 2015, p.209).

References:

Hanley, L. (2007) *Estates: An Intimate History*, London: Granta.

Jensen, T. (2014) 'Welfare Commonsense, Poverty Porn and Doxosophy', *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3).

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